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ABSTRACT

There have been a number of empirical approaches to understanding the factors that contribute to violence among black males, and there are a number of theories that try to explain black-on-black violence. After a review of some of these theories, this paper suggests certain aspects of programs to combat violence among African American males. Theories that are described include: (1) the poverty-social disorganization theory; (2) racial oppression-displaced aggression theory; (3) the subculture of violence theory; and (4) a theory of ecosystem distrust. Although there is no total agreement about the causes on interpersonal violence, all authorities agree that the causes are multiple and that the solutions must be varied and multiple. Proactive programs begin by making the community aware of the violence and the areas in which most problems occur. A second approach is to design programs, or even separate schools, specifically for black male children or adolescents. Although this recommendation is controversial, authorities generally support the idea that these youth need mentoring and positive manhood developing experiences. Teaching young black males to resolve conflict without violence must be a commitment shared by the whole community, as several multicomponent community program examples demonstrate. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

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A Survey of the Literature on the Theories of Violence and its Prevention

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Young black males are taught to survive. Allen (1981) contends that black boys are taught that the outside world is hostile and particularly racist, and that in order to cope, they must learn to be tough and confrontive. Being cool, indeed, being **cold**, earns one accolades and respect. The names of famous rappers are, as an example, "Ice-T," "Ice Cube," and "Cool Mode" (mo-DE). Coolness forms a kind of mask against assaults on a young black man's manhood, self-esteem and social competence. From an insensitive orientation there is a short leap to one of abuse and violence.

One of the seven core values of Ron Karenga's Afrocentric value system, kuchagulia is synonymous with self-determination, or defining ourselves, rather than allowing our culture to be defined by others. This paper will introduce the use of certain program options as a hedge against potential destructive becoming processes. The paper further advocates the infusion of programs into the college curriculum to replace or supplement current human development programs. Although it is a theoretical approach, the paper advocates a direction that is thoroughly supported by known successful practices.

In most public opinion polls today, crime is listed as one of the biggest concerns of most people. Closely associated with crime is violence. The Center for Substance Abuse Provention (CSAP, 1994) defines violence as any act that causes psychological, emotional, or physical harm to individuals and/or communities, or that causes damage to property. According to the definition, violence is not one isolated problem restricted to one segment of the population. It is multidimensional and pervasive. The definition includes homicide, assault, (including rape and sexual assault), spouse abuse and battering, child physical and sexual abuse, child neglect, suicide, and vandalism as well as other forms of property destruction. Even though reports have indicated that a number of crime types have actually declined (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993), violence, especially the random, blatant, and apparently senseless kind, and that in which the perpetrators are at an increasingly younger age, is on the increase. Youth violence, like alcohol and drug abuse, has taken an upturn in the last few years and this disturbing trend is especially true among black males.

The incidents of black male violence is well-documented. Although blacks represent about 12 percent of America's population, they are disproportionately represented among persons arrested for violent acts. Homicide is now the leading cause of death for black males 15-34 years of age. In a 1993 study, the U. S. Bureau of Justice Census estimated that the lifetime risk of death by homicide is greater for blacks (1 in 21 for black males and 1 in 104 for black females) than it is for whites (1 in 131 for white males and 1 in 369 for white females).

There are a number of empirical approaches to understanding the factors that contribute to violence among black males. A synopsis of the related literature reveals several causes, including a show of bravado and compulsive masculinity, (Oliver, 1994), acquired biological causes (such as head injury and brain malfunction due to alcohol abuse), (Fagan, 1990), poverty, social disorganization, inadequate socialization, racial discrimination, displaced aggression, black self-hate, adherence to the norms of a subculture of violence, the cheapening of black life as a result of criminal justice leniency toward blacks who assault or murder other blacks, and self-destructive lifestyles centered on heavy drinking and drug abuse (Fagan, 1989).

In his book, The Violent Social World of Black Men, Oliver discusses sociological theories and concepts that try to explain black-on-black violence. Specifically, he cites the poverty-social disorganizational theory, the racial oppression-displaced aggression theory , the subculture of violence theory, and the compulsive masculinity concept (Oliver, 1994). Jessor (1968) uses the concept of eco-system distrust as a possible explanation . An in depth examination of all of these theories would be tangential to this paper's purpose. However, a cursory look is warranted.

The poverty-social disorganization theory suggests that the disproportionate rates of criminal violence among blacks are a result of a high rate of poverty and a tendency to adhere to lower class values and traditions. Sociologists who advocate this position conclude that poverty contributes to the social conditions that are conducive to criminal violence. As an example, poverty-social disorganization theorists conclude that poverty leads to chronic unemployment, teen pregnancy, female-headed families,

academic failure, welfare dependency, inadequate socialization and substance abuse. These social scientists believe that poverty diminishes the ability of the black community to encourage its youth to adopt conventional values and behaviors (Oliver, 1994).

This lack of positive encouragement is the basis of the so-called racial oppression-displaced aggression theory which is a result of the anger and frustration experienced by people who are unable to achieve socially prescribed success goals. The primary goals that America prescribes are academic achievement, occupational and social prestige, upward mobility, financial success, and material acquisition. Individuals are encouraged to achieve these things by legitimate means. However, when access by legitimate means is blocked, frustration follows, which ultimately leads to aggression. Fear of physical or economic retaliation leads blacks to take out aggression not on whites, but on fellow blacks. Thus racial oppression-displaced aggression theorists argue that much of the violence among blacks is actually misplaced aggression, that is, aggression that is directed toward the wrong source of frustration.

Directing aggression, that is, perpetuating violence, is the subculture of violence theory. The disproportionate rates of criminal violence among blacks are a product of their commitment to subculture values and norms that condone violence as acceptable means of resolving interpersonal conflict. Late adolescents to middle-age blacks develop favorable attitudes that emphasize trouble, toughness, sexual conquests, manipulation, autonomy, and excitement.

One final approach that tries to explain young black male's disproportionate propensity toward violence is called eco-system distrust (Jessor, 1968). This concept

does not say that it specifically causes black male violence. However, its researchers offer the concept as a possible explanation for obtuse and social deviant behavior. There may be a diversity of cultural elements in any environment. Those people whose life styles and behaviors are compatible within the environment will receive positive outcomes and generally will fare well. Jessor and his cohorts say that eco-system distrust (distrust of people, things, and institutions in one's environment) may result, however, when one is forced by societal expectations to engage in behaviors that are appreciably different from those behaviors that individuals may perceive as normative in his/her community. Jessor says that the abuse of alcohol in some native American communities and the high incidence of crime in some black-American communities may be the results of eco-system distrust.

All animals react and adopt to their ecology, and young black males are no exception. Those who perceive that they live in a hostile environment perceive that violence is necessary for survival. Black boys, especially, are taught that the outside world is hostile and particularly racist, and that in order to cope, sons are socialized to be tough and confrontive (Majors & Billson, 1992). Being cool, indeed, being cold, earns one accolades and compliments. The names of famous rappers are, as an example, "Ice-T," "Ice Cube," and "Cool Mode," (mo-DE). Jim Croce, the deceased rock music composer wrote about, bad LeRoi Brown. Croce called him the meanest man in the whole damn town, and said that he was meaner than a junk yard dog. Being cool and being bad is considered a necessary defensive attribute. Coolness is defined by Lyman and Scott (1970) as "poise under pressure." It is the primary medium by which black men symbolically communicate their adherence to the 'tough guy' image and it forms a

kind of mask against assaults on a young black man's manhood, dignity, respect, control, self-esteem and social competence.

Perhaps one of the most blatant manifestations of that coolness is "womanizing." It is not at all uncommon for a young black male to develop pandering aspirations. Even a cursory perusal of fiction and nonfiction literature reveals that young black males often praise the pimping avocation. The glorification of pimps and pimping in the 1960's and 1970's are obvious in Charles Gordone's drama, No Place to Be Somebody, and in so many films during that same era. Aside from dressing in ostentatious clothes, what pimps do is exploit women mentally as well as physically abuse them. Even today, permanently etched in street vernacular is the term, 'pimp slap,' an act that is not only physically abusive but mentally humiliating as well. Even though most are not pimps, many young men are socialized to be aggressive and confrontive. Many black males defined masculinity in terms of dominance and the sexual exploitation of women. The "player of women" image is, a symbolic display characterized by efforts to attract more than one woman, maintain exclusive sexual access to most of the women with whom one is involved, and exercise control over a woman's emotions and economic resources (Oliver, 1994). From these orientations there is a short leap to being abusive and violent.

The impact of gang violence has not been ignored because I felt that it is trivial. The contrary is true. Gang contagion, complete with signs, the initiation rites, the insidiousness of their destructive force are a social phenomenon that has spread to small communities as well as to large metropolitan areas. Certainly in particular parts of this country, gang violence is more pronounced than any of the forms previously mentioned.

Regardless of its significance however, gang activity is a manifestation rather than a root cause of violence in general. Like, coolness, for example, gang violence is likely perceived as another manifestation of compulsive masculinity. As such it does not, in my opinion, warrant separate treatment; it is another form of the violent propensity of young black males.

It is this propensity toward violence, this exploitation of fellow human beings that is perhaps potentially the most destructive practice by any of us. Milner in his 1974 play, What the Wine Sellers Buy, put the whole problem into the proper perspective when he implied that what the wine sellers buy isn't as precious as what they sell. What the flesh-peddling pimp buys, what the young black males obtain materially is little compared to what they sacrifice when they exploit people.

The problems associated with this exploitation has been addressed in a number of ways particularly in the media. Television reinforces a clear message about manhood that feature nationally known male athletes, many of whom are engaged in violent sports like professional football. The athletes, who are undoubtedly role models to many young black males, end their advertisments with the admonition that violence is not necessarily synonymous with masculinity. In truth they warn that violence is not the way.

Although there is no total agreement about the causes of interpersonal violence among black males, all authorities agree that the causes are many and that therefore the solutions must be varied and multiple. One researcher in particular believes that any successful prevention program must begin with reforming the social context in which black males operate. He believes that all programs should target the conditions in which these men develop values and norms that encourage compulsive masculinity male

behavior (Oliver, 1994). Reformation of the social context includes community-based coalitions to heighten awareness and to prevent violence, education specifically tailored for young black males, mentoring and developmental programs, and all of these involved in a policing effort. The proposed solutions indicate that federal, state, local governments, the private sector, the educational system, and community agencies combine efforts to work against black male interpersonal violence. What follows is a summary of some of the recommendations.

Preventive programs begin with making a community aware of not only the violence, but the actual areas where the problems most often occur. I term this process, "Turn the Light on the Roaches." The purpose here is to expose these trouble spots to the community. (Such trouble spots might include any place where males hang out that is likely to produce or encourage unsavory violent behavior, including bars, major street corners, parks, parking lots, crack houses, etc.). Community-based coalitions should be formed, and they should work cooperatively with local politicians, religious leaders, business leaders and community groups to develop recreational, tutorial, and conflict-resolution, approaches for black males. The black males should be made aware that resorting to violence as a way of solving conflicts is not an option, but that instead their communities expect them to find acceptable nonviolent alternatives. In all cases, the community must own the problems of black male violence and must own the concept of self-help.

The second most common recommendation is also the most controversial. Two researchers recommend an alternative educational setting that is designed especially for at-risk young black males (Davis & Jordan, 1994). The oft-used rationale is that the

establishments of such school enhance the likelihood that these at-risk young men will graduate from high school with the needed skills and motivation to pursue either vocational training or higher education. In addition to this rationale, those who advocate separate schools for young at-risk black men say that these youths need to be educated by black teachers (Hawkins, 1996; Lyons, 1990). Those who advocate that blacks should teach blacks also say that young black males need teachers to whom they can relate and who will provide for them positive role models. One educator alleges that middle-class white teachers fear rather than nurture young black males, and that white middle-class oriented schools provide an education with questionable relevance to all but assimilationist black young men (Lyons, 1990). Indeed, most records indicate that black young men are suspended, expelled, assigned to special education curriculum and drop out of school in disproportionate numbers (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

As sound as the rationale, (to establish separate schools for at-risk young black males), may appear, the idea is not without its critics. There are those who feel that separate black school is an immoral separation of race and sex and little more than reverse discrimination and an illegal disbursement of public funds. Critics also argue that it is the societal function of all public education to assimilate (Davis & Jordan, 1994).

While there is not total agreement with regard to separate schooling for at-risk young black men, all generally support the idea that these youth need mentoring and positive manhood developing experiences. Perhaps one of the most cogent arguments for separate black schools with black male teachers is that such institutions and teachers may provide positive role models for the students. Questions that are fundamental to developing young black men are, "What does a man do? How does he behave? What is

proper and manly?" Given the fact that there are chronic rates of teenage pregnancy, female-headed families, poverty, unemployment, crime, and imprisonment, the previous questions go to the heart of manhood development.

The manhood development programs have been criticized for their lack of uniformity in the age range of the people they serve, curriculum format and the frequency of meetings. Criticism results in part because it is difficult to determine the most appropriate ages that ought to be included (Sanders & Reed, 1995). It is difficult also to determine the characteristics of the included group, although some critics believe that age-specific sessions that focus on so-called "proper behavior" are important (Gordon, 1994). Although there is disagreement about age groups and curricular content, most observers agree that young at-risk black males need to simulate behavior that is valued in "the streets" (Hunter & Davis , 1994). These young men must feel and be reassured that the behavior that they learn in manhood development centers defines them as men. What is crucial is that the young men develop viable strategies that resolve conflict without violence.

Teaching young black males how to resolve conflict without violence must be a commitment that is shared by the entire community and that is why most researchers recommend community centers with multicomponent thrusts (Harris, 1992). The business of a multicomponent community center is to show young black males that there are more desirable ways to solve conflicts, and to undermine the allure of street activities. Recreation is often mentioned as a common inducement to get these young men off the streets and to tutor, counsel, and teach them non-violent conflict-resolution techniques, and develop them as productive men. Naturally the resource people who provide the

tutoring, training, and the counseling should be people that the young men relate to, admire and who are perceived as excellent role models.

Successful multicomponent community center models abound, and many of them have developed linkages with organizations at the state and national levels. The Challenger Boys Club in Los Angeles has been cited as an excellent example of a multicomponent community center. Recently it has received national recognition for the methods it has used to coordinate its programs to prevent violence and other problematic behaviors among black youth (Oliver, 1994). Groups such as the National association for the Education of Young Children, the National Parents Association, and the Children's Defense Fund have assigned top priority to addressing violence tendencies among children. The fact that these groups have designated programs for children rather than adolescents attest to the wisdom of early recognition of childhood tendencies and addressing those tendencies early.

Early intervention is important not only because it identifies early violent tendencies, but because it also allows significant community leaders the opportunity to know at-risk, young black males. Knowing these youths provides the community more effective policing. Most researchers recommend community policing and recommend that such policing be linked to the community's efforts to tutor, counsel, and guide youth to be productive and non-violent men. The emphasis on policing should be directed toward prevention of violence rather than punishing after violent manifestations have occurred. Total and close community involvement is recommended, including conspicuous foot patrol police in high-risk areas. Although the idea of returning the old-fashioned foot patrol officer is hardly innovative, becoming familiar and establishing

rapport with area residents are the purposes. When police know and become known in a community, the emphasis can better be placed on the prevention of violence rather than the punishment of it.

Conclusion

It is not possible at this time to offer a specific panacea for violence among black males. Males imitate others, that is, the young men who are seeking models, have found some values that seem to reward toughness and violence, although there is disagreement on the causes for this social malady. Many black youths see violence as a necessary trait to acquire on their way to becoming men, a sort of rite of passage. As this rite of passage is acted out, society as a whole suffers, for we are the recipients of the violent manifestations. Just as there is not total agreement among researchers with regard to the causes of black youth violent behavior, there is no total agreement regarding its treatment. I contend, however, that prevention is more desirable than is punishment. Several successful models of community-based violence prevention programs exist.

Perhaps it is not too cynical to say that in an election year, especially when both major parties tout so-called, 'family values,' it may be more acceptable to advocate the punishment of male violence rather than its prevention. The literature, however, appears to say that young male violence is a disease that directly or indirectly plagues all of society. Those writers who say that violence is a disease also maintain that it is far better to work for its prevention than to treat its manifestations. Most researchers conclude that we should establish more institutions, support appropriate people and agencies that look toward preventing violence. This, they say is more desirable than

building more and larger penal institutions.

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